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SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: PROVOCATIVE SAUDI COMEDY HIGHLIGHTS INFLATION CONCERNS

¶1. (SBU) For sixteen years, Saudi viewers have become accustomed to gathering around their television sets after breaking the Ramadan fast to watch the highly satirical and painfully critical Saudi comedy show Tash Ma Tash. This show broadcasts one thirty minute skit each night during Ramadan, generally lampooning the main events and social concerns of the year. In a society where public criticism of social norms, economic conditions, and government policies can be frowned upon, Tash Ma Tash stands out for provocatively challenging established Saudi norms. In previous years, they have poked fun at the religious police, for example.

¶2. (SBU) One episode of this year's show entitled "No More Rice" depicted the severity of the rice shortage Saudi Arabia suffered in early 2008 as a consequence of India and Pakistan's decisions to suspend rice exports. (Note: Rice is considered a basic commodity in Saudi Arabia. It is one of the two basic ingredients used to make "kebsa," a popular and traditional Saudi dish made with lamb, mutton, or chicken and served on a large bed of rice.) This shortage contributed to record-high inflation and reportedly convinced King Abdullah to relieve former Commerce Minister Hashim Yamani of his duties in March 2008.

¶3. (SBU) The satirical episode depicts a large Saudi family trying desperately to acquire enough rice to meet its daily needs. With supplies scarce, the price of a 5 kg bag of rice jumps from 90 SR to 500 SR (from \$25 to \$130), creating a lucrative black market. The two lead characters, who play the roles of the brothers Abu Hizaar and Abu Nizar, do nothing all day but watch the local news for updates on the "rice crisis." In a discussion between them and a friend, Abu Hizaar questions how a Saudi living on a monthly salary of 5,000SR (\$1,330) can survive under the circumstances. The episode's punch line comes when both brothers arrange to purchase rice on the black market. Similar to a TV drug buy, they meet a rice supplier in a remote desert location and exchange a suitcase of cash for a bag of rice.

¶4. (SBU) Another episode, entitled "Poverty," depicts a Saudi government employee who makes 6,000 SR a month (\$1,600). He and his wife are burdened with debt. In a reference to the high inflation in local real estate prices over the past two years (including a 40 percent hike in the price of rental housing), the tenant receives notice from his landlord that his annual rent will increase 20 percent to 25,000 SR (\$6,670). In their struggle to make ends meet, the Saudi couple decides to take in an Egyptian family in order to earn extra money to afford the rent. The episode ends with the Saudi couple rushing the pregnant Egyptian woman to a nearby hospital to deliver her baby. The Saudi husband ends up borrowing more money to pay 9,000 SR (2,400 USD) for the Egyptian woman's delivery.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) The show points out how much price increases of basic goods hurt Saudis, especially those at or below the poverty line, for whom price and rent increases were no laughing matter. Only 40 percent of Saudis own their own homes. Although inflation has receded from last year's high of 11 percent to 4.1 percent in August 2009, rents have not declined, and Saudi authorities will remain sensitive to

further inflationary pressures as the global economy recovers. The subjects of this show illustrate the economic hardships faced by middle and lower income citizens whose standard of living continues to decline, despite the country's aggregate wealth.

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